

HOW TO DISCIPLINE YOUR CHILD

How do you keep a 1-year-old from heading toward the VCR? What should you do when your preschooler throws a fit? How can you get your adolescent to respect your authority? Find out here how to vary your approach to discipline to best fit your family.

Whatever the age of your child, it's important to be consistent in disciplining your child. If you don't stick to the rules and consequences that you set up, your child isn't likely to either.

Ages 0 to 2

Knowing that babies and toddlers are naturally curious, it's a good idea to eliminate any temptations for your young child to act out. Keep your young child's environment relatively free of no-no's - items such as VCRs, stereos, jewelry, and especially cleaning supplies and medications should be kept well out of his reach. When your crawling baby or roving toddler heads toward an unacceptable or dangerous play object, calmly say, "No," and redirect your child by either removing him or her from the area or engaging your child's attention with an appropriate activity.

Timeouts can be effective discipline for toddlers. A child who has been hitting, biting, or throwing food, for example, should be told why that behavior is unacceptable and taken to a designated timeout area - a kitchen chair or bottom stair - for a minute or two to calm down (longer timeouts are not effective for toddlers).

It's important to not spank, hit, or slap a child of any age. Babies and toddlers are especially unlikely to be able to make any connection between their behavior and physical punishment. They will only feel the pain of the hit.

And don't forget, kids learn by watching adults, particularly their parents. Make sure your behavior is role-model material. You will make a much stronger impact on your child if he sees you putting your belongings away, too, rather than if you just tell him or her to pick up the toys while you leave your stuff strewn across the kitchen counter.

Ages 3 to 5

As your child grows and can begin to understand the connection between actions and consequences, make sure you begin to communicate the rules of your family's home. It's important to explain to kids what you expect of them **before** you punish them for a certain behavior. For instance, the first time your 3-year-old uses crayons to decorate the living room wall, you should discuss why that is not allowed and what will happen if your child does this again. Explain to your child that he or she will have to help clean the wall and will not be able to use the crayons for the rest of the afternoon. If your child draws on the walls again a few days later, it's a good idea to remind your child that crayons are for paper only and then enforce the consequences.

The earlier parents can set up this kind of "I set the rules and you're expected to listen or accept the consequences," the better for everyone. Although it's sometimes easier for parents to ignore occasional bad behavior or fail to follow through on some threatened punishment, this risks setting a bad precedent. Consistency is the key to effective discipline. It's important for parents to decide **together** what the rules are and then be consistent in upholding them.

At the same time you become clear on what behaviors will be punished, don't forget to reward good behaviors. And don't underestimate the positive effect that your praise can have on your child. Discipline is not just about punishment. Parents need to remember to recognize good behavior. For example, you could say, "I'm proud of you for sharing your toys at playgroup." This is usually

more effective than punishing a child for the opposite behavior - not sharing. And be specific when praising your child; don't just say, "Good job!"

If your child is displaying an unacceptable behavior that just won't go away no matter what you do, consider setting up a chart system. Put up a chart with a box for each day of the week on the refrigerator and decide how many chances you'll give your child to display the unacceptable behavior before some punishment kicks in or how long the proper behavior must be displayed before it is rewarded. Then simply keep track by monitoring on a daily basis. This will give your child (and you) a concrete look at how he or she doing. Once this begins to work, don't forget to praise your child for learning to control misbehavior (*see bottom of article for additional information on controlling misbehavior*) and especially for overcoming any stubborn problem.

Timeouts also can work well for children at this stage. Establish a suitable timeout place that is free of distractions and will force your child to think about how he or she has behaved. Remember, getting sent to your room may have meant something in the days before computers, TVs, and video games were stored there. Don't forget to consider the length of time that will best suit your child. Experts say 1 minute for each year of age is a good rule of thumb to follow; others recommend using the timeout until the child is calmed down (to teach self-regulation).

It's important to tell your child what the right thing to do is, not just to tell your child what not to do. For example, instead of telling your child: "Don't jump on the couch," you may want to say: "Please sit on the furniture and put your feet on the floor."

Ages 6 to 8

Timeouts and consequences are also effective discipline strategies with this age group.

Again, consistency is crucial, as is following through. Make good on any promises of discipline or else you will risk undermining your authority. Kids have to believe that you mean what you say. This is not to say you can't give second chances or allow your child a certain margin of error, but for the most part, you should follow through with what you say.

Be careful not to make unrealistic threats of punishment ("Slam that door and you'll never watch TV again!") in anger, since not following through could weaken **all** your threats. If you threaten to turn the car around and go home if the squabbling in the backseat doesn't stop, make sure you do exactly that. The lost day at the beach is much less valuable than the credibility you'll gain with your kids.

Huge punishments may take away your power as a parent. If you ground your son or daughter for a month, your child may not feel motivated to change his or her behavior because everything has already been taken away.

Ages 9 to 12

Kids in this age group - just as with all ages - can be disciplined with natural consequences. As they mature and request more independence and responsibility, teaching them to deal with the consequences of their behavior is an effective and appropriate method of discipline.

For example, if your fifth grader has not done his or her homework before bedtime, should you make him or her stay up or help him finish? Probably not, since you'll be missing an opportunity to teach your child something about life. If he or she doesn't do homework earlier, your child will go to school without it the next day and suffer the resulting bad grade.

It's natural for you to want to rescue your child from any mistakes, but in the long run you'll be doing your child more of a favor if you let him or her fail sometimes. Your child will see what behaving

improperly can mean, and will probably not make those mistakes again. However, if your child does not seem to be learning from natural consequences, you should set up your own consequences to help him modify his behavior more effectively.

Ages 13 and Up

By now you've laid the groundwork. Your child knows what's expected of him or her and knows that you mean what you say about the consequences of bad behavior. Don't let down your guard now - discipline is just as important for teens as it is for younger children. Just like the 4-year-old who needs you to set a bedtime and stick to it, no matter how much he or she whines, your teen needs to know boundaries, too.

Make sure to set up rules regarding homework, visits by friends, curfews, and dating and discuss them beforehand with your teenager so there will be no misunderstandings. Your teen, although he or she will probably complain from time to time, will realize that you are in control. Believe it or not, teens still want and need you to set limits and enforce order in their lives, even as you grant them greater freedom and responsibility.

When your teen **does** break a rule, taking away privileges may seem to be the best plan of action. While it's fine to take away the car for a week, for example, be sure to discuss with your child why coming home an hour past curfew is unacceptable and worrisome.

It's also important to give a teenager some control over life. Not only will this limit the number of power struggles you may have, it will help your teen to respect the decisions you must make for him or her. With a younger teen, you could allow him or her to make his or her own decisions concerning school clothes, hair styles, or even the condition of his or her room. As your teen gets older, that realm of control might be extended to include an occasional relaxed curfew.

It's also important to focus on the positives. For example, have your child earn a later curfew by demonstrating positive behavior, rather than giving your teen an earlier curfew as punishment for irresponsible behavior.

A Word About Spanking

There is perhaps no more controversial form of discipline than spanking. Here are some reasons why the American Academy of Pediatrics encourages parents to avoid spanking:

- Spanking teaches children that it's OK to hit when they're angry.
- Spanking can physically harm children.
- Rather than teaching children how to change their behavior, spanking makes them fearful of their parents and teaches them merely to avoid getting caught.
- In the case of children who are looking for attention by acting out, spanking may inadvertently "reward" children by giving them attention - negative attention is better than no attention at all.

CONTROLLING MISBEHAVIOR

The tantrums and outbursts of a child who has no self-control can rile even the most patient of parents.

Whether you're in the middle of a crowded grocery store, at a holiday dinner with extended family, or even at home, these fits can be extremely frustrating. But they may be a little easier to handle if your child learns a sense of self-control, how to make choices about how to respond to a situation, instead of just relying on impulses.

By exercising self-control, your child can learn to make appropriate decisions and respond to stressful situations in ways that will be more likely to have positive outcomes.

For example, if you tell your child that you are not going to serve ice cream until after dinner, your child may cry, plead, or even scream in the hopes that you will give in. If your child has a sense of self-control, he or she might understand that a temper tantrum may cause you to take away the ice cream for good. And your child may be more willing to wait patiently for ice cream after dinner.

How Can You Help Your Child Learn Self-Control?

Here are a few suggestions on how you can help your child learn to control his or her behavior:

- **birth to age 2:** Infants and toddlers frequently get frustrated because there's a large gap between the things they want to do and what they are actually able to do. They often respond to those frustrations with temper tantrums. You may be able to prevent your child from having an outburst by distracting him or her with toys or other activities. By the time your child is 2 years old, you may want to use a brief time-out (when your child is taken to a designated time-out area - a kitchen chair or bottom stair - for a minute or 2 to calm down) to show that there are consequences for outbursts. Time-outs can also teach your child that it's best to take some time alone in the face of frustration, instead of throwing a temper tantrum.
- **ages 3 to 5:** At this stage, you may want to continue to use time-outs. But rather than sticking to a specific time limit, it's a good idea to end time-outs as soon as your child has calmed down. This can be an effective way to encourage your child to improve his or her sense of self-control. It's also a good idea to praise your child for not losing control in situations that are frustrating or difficult.
- **ages 6 to 9:** As your child enters school, he or she will likely be able to understand the idea of consequences and that he or she can choose good or bad behavior. It may help your child to imagine a stop sign that he or she needs to obey and think about a situation before responding. You may want to encourage your child to walk away from a frustrating situation for a few minutes to cool off instead of having an outburst.
- **ages 10 to 12:** Older children are typically able to better understand their feelings. Encourage your child to think about the situation that is causing him or her to lose control and then analyze it. You may want to explain to your child that sometimes the situations that are upsetting at first don't end up being as awful as they first seem. You may want to urge your child to take some time to think before responding to a situation.
- **ages 13 to 17:** At this point, your child should be able to control most of his or her actions. But you may need to remind your teen to think about long-term consequences of his or her actions. Continue to urge your teen to take time to evaluate upsetting situations before responding to them. Also encourage your child to talk through troubling situations rather than losing control, slamming doors, or yelling. At this point you may need to discipline your child by taking away certain privileges, for example, to reinforce the message that self-control is an important skill.

What to Do When Your Child Is Out of Control

It's important to set a good example for your child by demonstrating healthy ways to react to stressful situations. As difficult as it may be, it's a good idea to resist the urge to yell when you are disciplining your child. Instead, try to be firm and matter of fact. If your child is losing his or her temper, instead of losing yours, too, calmly let your child know that yelling, throwing a tantrum, and slamming doors is unacceptable behavior, and it has consequences. Calmly explain what those consequences are.

If your child has an occasional temper tantrum or outburst, in many cases, it's a good idea to show your child that a tantrum is not an effective method to get what he or she wants. For example, if your child gets upset at the grocery store after you've explained why you are not buying any candy, if you don't give in to it, you have demonstrated that a tantrum is unacceptable behavior, and it doesn't work.

If your child frequently loses control and is continually argumentative, antisocial, or impulsive or if tantrums last for more than 10 minutes on a regular basis, you may want to talk to your child's doctor.

For school-age children, you may want to also talk to the doctor if the tantrums are accompanied by the following behaviors:

- restlessness
- impulsiveness
- defiance
- difficulty in concentrating
- low self-esteem
- declining performance in school

You might also consider talking to your child's teachers about classroom settings and appropriate behavioral expectations for your child. Also, look at your own actions to see if you are managing stressful situations as well as you can. If not, you might want to ask your family doctor about whether family counseling sessions may help.